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Authenticity, Religious Identity and Consumption: a Reflexive (Auto)Ethnographic Account

Introduction

Concerns about epistemology and methodology should be central to critical inquiries into the intersection between Islam, marketing and consumption. In this chapter, I address epistemological and methodological questions in relation to an ethnographic study I conducted in January 2012. This chapter explores issues that critical marketing may have overlooked due to a lack of familiarity with Muslim socio-cultural contexts. I also discuss topics that lie at the intersection of religion, identity, gender and consumption within the context of a Muslim pilgrimage. The purpose of studying consumption during a pilgrimage is to broaden our understanding of religious material, culture and consumption. The sacred sites of pilgrimages are often important commercial centres featuring vibrant marketplaces, where spiritual goods and services are sold (Scott and Maclaran, 2012). As such, pilgrimages and pilgrims' consumption behaviours can provide rich sites of inquiry into symbolic, spiritual and material consumption. A plethora of studies on religion as a component of identity have already examined the role of objects and consumption practices in constructing and communicating religious identities (Sandıkcı and Ger, 2010; Mehta and Belk, 1991; Wattasunawan and Elliott, 1999; Karataş and Sandıkcı, 2013).

I focus the first half of my chapter on the research process itself, the so-called fieldwork, headwork and textwork (see Van Maanen, 2011), and the choices I had to make in order to 'experience' this context and concurrently collect data. I seek to make sense of the way we –

a group of women and myself – consumed space, objects and experiences ‘within’ a deeply religious context. In this project, I adopt an ethnographic approach to fieldwork, data collection and analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Full-time immersion in the natural setting provided me with the opportunity to experience reality in the same manner as the participants (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), thereby gaining a deep understanding of consumer behaviour in context. Data were collected via participation in a three week pilgrimage to holy sites and shrines in Syria and Iraq. The programme involved a three day march from Najaf to Karbala in Iraq, visits to shrines in Syria and Iraq as well as participation in various religious practices and rituals. In doing this, I follow Bristor and Fischer’s (1993, p. 533) suggestion to incorporate “data collection methods that recognise emergent subjective experiences of women and minority groups as epistemologically valid and instruments that are sensitive to the effects of gendered, or otherwise biased, language”.

Autoethnographic insights arising from my journey are included. Autoethnography is concerned with the self (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012), where “the self and the field become one” (Coffey, 2002, p. 320). I realised that any attempt to distance myself from the field would be futile, so I decided to embrace the situation and include personal insights arising from my journey. This research project has been personally transformative; writing about this pilgrimage proved to me that the journey did not end when I returned to the UK. Reflecting on the journey brought to the fore issues related to ‘doing research’, ‘knowing’ and ‘writing’ that all researchers face when engaging with (ethnographic) difficult and deeply personal research projects. The discussion of the relevant literature is, therefore, interwoven with my reflections on the pilgrimage experience.

I begin this chapter by addressing epistemological and methodological questions and the choices made in order to ‘operationalize’ the project. The nature of the ethnography (and the ethnographer) inevitably engendered a feminist approach to the research, and I discuss this. After this reflexive discussion, I provide an account of the ethnographic and autoethnographic methodology adopted, and I tackle the issue of reflexivity itself. Then I describe the data collection process. The main findings of the research are also presented. Prominent themes, such as identity, consumption and authenticity, emerge and are discussed in relation to both the pilgrims and the holy sites. Finally, I examine the authenticity of the research process itself.

Epistemology and methodology

At the core of all scientific inquiry are ontological and epistemological questions such as: What is the nature of reality? What can we know? How can we know it? What are the sources of our knowledge? Researchers need to consider and make explicit a set of assumptions about the social world, for example, who the knower can be and what can be known. These assumptions influence the decisions a researcher makes, including what to study (based on what can be studied) and how to conduct a study (i.e. methodology) (Hesse-Biber, 2011). Choosing an appropriate methodology and approach to study the meanings that people attach to their experiences and consumption practices is critical. One needs to adopt an approach that acknowledges both rational and non-rational experiences, the spiritual and transcendental. This is why I wished to embed this research in an Islamic epistemology; Islam theorizes ways of being, knowing and doing (Sardar, 1991), and this acknowledges the religious and spiritual dimension of my research.

One distinctive feature of Islam is the concept of *tawhid* or unity of knowledge (Ul-Haq and Westwood, 2012). According to this concept, although knowledge can be acquired in a variety of ways (cognitively, intuitively or emotionally from the heart), it ultimately originates from a single source, Allah (Hirst et al., 2013). Hence, there can be no separation between religion and science. *Tawhid* also implies a continuous process in which knowledge grows and unifies but can never be complete. According to Maurer (2002, p. 652), Islam “demands a fundamental reconfiguration of epistemology – indeed, a dissolution of epistemology itself into the incompleteness of approaching but never reaching the overarching unity of divine thought, as if a limit-function”. This all-encompassing approach to reality and to ways of knowing means that our knowledge is never complete and attaining ‘the truth out there’ with our imperfect human tools is impossible. However, this should not prevent us from trying, especially bearing in mind God’s commandment to seek knowledge. I agree with Sardar’s argument that there are also different ways of knowing and that attempting to answer the ‘How do you know?’ question depends on who ‘you’ are and on “how you look at the world, how you shape your inquiry, the period and culture that shapes your outlook and the values that frame how you think” (in Sardar and Masood, 2006, p. 1). This is the reason why ethnography was chosen for this research. Ethnography is “first and foremost a social practice concerned with the study and representation of culture” (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 150), which helps to generate a localized understanding of cultural processes – i.e. meaning-making – from a few conceptual vantage points, and its use in this study has been particularly enlightening. I hold the view that ethnographic approaches (or at the very least, reflexivity in research and writing) are particularly useful in the study of marketing and consumption practices in a Muslim context.

By taking the group of women pilgrims and myself as a starting point for my research, I loosely adopt a feminist methodology, which regards the lives of women as central (Scholz, 2010). Feminist approaches to knowledge building recognize “the essential importance” of examining women’s experiences (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004, p. 3). In other words, they make experience (or experiential knowledge) an important category of research (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004, p. 3). The premise of almost all feminist methodologies is the epistemological belief that women can possess and share valuable knowledge and, thus, research can start from the perspective of women (Smith, 1987; Harding, 1993; Hesse-Biber et al., 2004).

Conceptualizing women as “a starting point for research not only validates their knowledge and includes them in a process from which they have long been excluded but also attempts to upend the power relations that are reproduced in traditional positivistic scientific research” (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004, p. 14).

Adopting this approach, I use my experience and that of my ‘informants’ to provide an understanding of consumption practices from a European Muslim female point of view within the framework of Islam and/or Islamic culture. As such, my contribution can be positioned within an Islamic feminist approach that helps elucidate the particular context of the study. (Secular) feminism tends to dismiss (monotheist) religions as patriarchal and sexist (Badran, 2005). However, on a basic level, feminist perspectives in social research ask questions about who can possess knowledge, how knowledge is or can be obtained and what knowledge is (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004). Thus, I highlight the possibility of a Muslim feminist analysis operating within the framework of Islam/Islamic culture. Islamic feminism is also characterized by its intersectionality, and is part and parcel of the feminist project:

“[t]here is no single feminist epistemology or methodology. Instead, multiple feminist lenses wake us up to layers of sexist, racist, homophobic, and colonialist points of view. Some lenses provide radical insights into knowledge building that upend traditional epistemologies and methodologies, offering more complex understandings and solutions toward reclaiming subjugated knowledge.” (Hesse-Biber, 2011, p. 3).

Broadly speaking, Islamic feminists consider that equality is at the foundation of Islam and that the *Qur'an*'s message guarantees women's rights. Their project involves the redefinition, reinvention and re-appropriation of feminism (Ali, 2012). Islamic feminists highlight the Islamicness of their engagement with women's rights, raising questions about equality, using their own methodologies and terms (e.g. how questions related to gender equality are thought about, articulated and engaged with in contexts where Islam is a major reference (Ali, 2012)). In doing so, Islamic feminists have encountered formidable opponents. On the one hand, they face those feminists who see all religions, Islam in particular, as patriarchal and sexist. On the other hand, they oppose fundamentalists who consider feminism to be a Western invention that does not have any place in Islam. On the 'religious' front, Islamic feminists question Muslim jurisprudence elaborated from a masculine and sexist point of view, denouncing both the marginalization of the role and place of women in classic Muslim historiography and the appropriation of religious knowledge and authority by men to the detriment of women (Ali, 2012). Islamic feminism calls for a return to the sources of Islam (*Qur'an* and *Sunnah*) to purge Islam of its sexist readings and interpretations, which betray its original emancipatory essence. The original Islam, they argue, promotes gender equality and achieving this requires the re-appropriation of religious knowledge and authority (Ali, 2012). Interestingly, the issue of the 'original' true Islam became an important dimension of my project, with the search for authenticity being at the core of the pilgrimage for many of my participants.

On (Auto)ethnography and reflexivity

Ethnography

More than a data-gathering method, ethnography is a “a style of social science writing which draws upon the writer’s close observation of and involvement with people in a particular social setting and relates the words spoken and the practices observed or experienced to the overall cultural framework within which they occurred” (Watson, 2011, p. 205). Ethnography is a methodological approach to and an analytical perspective on social research; it implies conceptual work that gives direction to fieldwork and its various representational practices (Van Maanen, 2011). According to Van Maanen (2011), ethnographic research involves three constitutive and overlapping tasks: fieldwork, headwork and textwork. Fieldwork is a way of gathering research materials by “subjecting the self – body, belief, personality, emotions, cognitions – to a set of contingencies that play on others, such that over time ... one can more or less see, hear, feel and come to understand the kinds of responses others display (and withhold) in particular social situations” (p. 219). Headwork is “the conceptual work that informs ethnographic fieldwork” (p. 222), while textwork is about the written outcome of research. All three tasks involve choices made by the researcher, some of which are made consciously, while others have already been ‘made’ for us and may thus be unknown and unexamined (Hirst et al., 2013). Chia (2002, p. 3) refers to these unknown choices as “unconscious metaphysics” that “influence our focus of attention, what we consider to be significant or insignificant and, ultimately, our methods of conceptualization”. Researchers, therefore, bring a kind of ‘epistemology in the head’, linked to the philosophical preferences of the cultures from which their own identities have emerged, and this frames the interpretations they make (Hirst et al., 2013).

Autoethnography and the issue of reflexivity

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that “displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner, 2006, p. 733). It is a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. Both a method and a text, it can be conducted by either an anthropologist who is doing “home or ‘native’ ethnography or by a non-anthropologist/ethnographer” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9).

Autoethnography aims to provide a “solo narrative [...] reveal[ing] a discovery and retell[ing] an epiphany in a character’s life” (Saldana, 2003, in Humphreys, 2005, p. 841).

Autoethnography lends itself well to research related to emotionally charged encounters and contexts (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012) but can also be used for analysis of the mundane (Humphreys and Watson, 2009).

Although representing others can generally present the researcher with a variety of challenges, representing others who bear a strong resemblance to the researcher is perhaps the hardest task. In representing others, the researcher is representing herself, and this has to be done in an open, reflexive and rigorous manner to avoid the findings being briskly dismissed as self-indulgent navel-gazing (Maréchal, 2010; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The critical ethnographer must explicitly consider and reflect on how the act of researching and representing people and situations could be deemed an act of domination. By using autoethnography, I aim to position myself as a research participant rather than the all-knowledgeable expert in this research. In this instance, autoethnography allows me to “move away from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer and toward the embrace of intimate involvement, engagement and embodied participation” (Ellis and Bochner, 2006, pp.

433-434). The choice of autoethnography is justified by the centrality of stories; the stories I have been told and the stories I want to tell about others and about myself.

Personal autobiographical modes of writing are “vital for knowledge production in the social sciences” (Reed-Danahay, 2001, p.411). Autoethnography allows the researcher to look inward, studying herself to create a reflexive dialogue with the readers of the piece (Humphreys, 2005). In critical ethnography, the ethnographer attempts to recognize and articulate her own perspective as a means of acknowledging the biases that her own limitations, history and institutional standpoint bring to her work (Madison, 2004). My research approach is inevitably a reflection of my academic background but is also influenced by my national culture(s), class, gender, religion and experiences. Hence, it is important that I say who I am, and autoethnography enables me to do this.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a) the process of critical self-reflection on one’s biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences, etc. and b) an acknowledgement of the inquirer’s place in the setting, context and social phenomenon she seeks to understand as well as a means of critically examining the entire research process (Schwandt, 1997; Kleinsasser, 2000).

Researcher reflexivity has been established as a ‘good ethnographic practice’ (Brewer, 1994).

It is a “process that challenges the researcher to explicitly examine how his or her research agenda, assumptions, subject locations, personal beliefs and emotions impinge upon the research” (Hsiung, 2008, p. 212).

I view the notion of reflexivity as a negotiation between ‘closeness’ and ‘distance’. This dimension of reflexivity is sometimes taken for granted in the literature, but I wish to explore at this point the theoretical complexity of managing empirical intimacy while also acknowledging gaps in knowledge between the researcher(s) and the researched. Some scholars (Gubrium and Hosltein, 1997; Arber, 2005) advocate the necessity to maintain ‘distance’ during ethnographic research. They argue that this is particularly relevant for those wishing to retain some form of objectivity, in particular when studying their own ‘tribe’ (Pollner, 1987). Such an approach is believed to help shed light on the tacit and implicit dimensions of research that may not be easily shared as they are often taken for granted (Charmaz, 2004).

Based on my experience of researching sites where deep religious and cultural affinities between myself as the researcher and the ‘researched’ existed, I feel that reflexivity takes on an added resonance because the research participants regard the researcher as ‘one of their own’. In this case, I became the co-opted outsider. Reflexivity became a central element of my data collection that entailed continuous meaning construction and negotiation. Ultimately, such negotiations with the self would also raise existential and ethical issues in relation to the writing of research papers for academic journals and conferences. Following Kleinsasser (2000, p. 155), I approach reflexivity as a methodical process of learning about the self as researcher, which in turn cultivates a deeper and richer consideration of personal, theoretical, ethical and epistemological aspects of the research question.

‘Fieldwork’: The Ethnographic Journey at the *Ziyara-t-Arba’een*

Pilgrimages are a feature of all major world religions as well as spiritual movements and more secular realms (Digance, 2003; Margry, 2008). They play a central role in Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxy. In 2012, about 4 million pilgrims visited Mecca to accomplish the Hajj, an obligatory religious commandment for all able-bodied Muslims who can afford the financial costs. While the Hajj is the most widely performed Islamic pilgrimage, other Islamic holy sites in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan attract millions of visitors. The visitation to these sites are known as *ziyara*. While the Hajj is pan-Islamic, the Shi'a pilgrimages to Karbala (in Iraq), Mashhad (in Iran) or Damascus (in Syria) are more regional or sectarian in nature (Pinto, 2007). I participated in the *Ziyara-t-Arba'een*, one of the largest pilgrimages in the world. In January 2012, for example, 17 million pilgrims were reported to have gathered at Karbala for this pilgrimage.

Ziyara-t-Arba'een takes place forty days after *Ashura*, which commemorates the anniversary of the martyrdom of the grandson of Prophet Mohammed, Imam Hussein, slaughtered by the armies of the caliph Yazid in 680 AD. Responding to the call of people from Najaf, Imam Hussein marched to contest the legitimacy of the despot Yazid, a notorious morally corrupt ruler. After a campaign of intimidation and repression, the majority of Hussein's followers failed to turn up on the battlefield, and he was left to fight an army of thousands of men with a group of just 72 men, consisting of his closest family members, friends and followers. Their respective families (including children) accompanied them to the battle, which ended with the deaths of all in Imam Hussein's army in the desert of Karbala. The women and children were taken captive and forced to march in chains to Syria to face Yazid and parade in front of the local population. The Battle of Karbala and its main protagonists are potent symbols in Shi'a Islam (Pinto, 2007), and *Ashura* and the pilgrimage to the tombs of its martyrs are central to the historical development and organization of Shi'ism (Pinto, 2007). *Ashura* and *Ziyara-t-*

Arba'een commemorations feature spectacular rituals of mourning, such as synchronized rhythmic pounding of the chest, chanted elegies, prayers, and also theatrical re-enactments of the events. During *Ashura* and *Ziyara-t-Arba'een*, Karbala hosts millions of Iraqi and international pilgrims, who create a vast demand not only for services (e.g. transportation and catering) but also for consumer goods.

Our trip took place in January 2012, but I was made aware of the plans and preparations for this *ziyara* in November 2011. It took me several agonizing weeks to make the decision to join and to start organizing the paperwork (visa, flights booking, etc.). At the time, media reports highlighting the volatility of the situation in Syria and Iraq were rife. The danger was real (including terrorist attacks and kidnapping), and I was wondering whether it was worth taking such a risk for a research project. Once I had made the decision to join the group of pilgrims, I sought permission to perform the study and conduct interviews from Rabab, the group leader. The group consisted of 12 Shi'a women, aged between 32 and 64, from Brussels, Belgium. Group members were all Belgian citizens of Moroccan or Iraqi descent. Notably, all 9 Moroccan pilgrims had converted to Shi'ism when they were adults or teenagers. I shared many characteristics (e.g. gender, ethnic origin, social class and citizenship) with several of them. This was particularly the case with the 4 younger participants, who were of a similar age to me, were also born and raised in Belgium and, like me, had limited skills in classical Arabic; we communicated in French during the whole trip.

On the first morning in Damascus, I disclosed my researcher status to the group along with my interest in their overall experience of the pilgrimage (e.g. practices, rituals, meanings and consumption). Consent was sought from and granted by all the participants, who also agreed

to let me use their real names in my research. The most striking and touching part of this was the immediate trust placed in me by the respondents. They told me, “Good! At least *you* will tell the truth about us, about who we really are”. The ‘us’ I came to understand was ‘us Muslim women’ but also ‘us Shi’a Muslims’. This duality is not benign. It highlights the way in which these women perceive themselves as misrepresented by both some members of the Sunni majority and some non-Muslims in Belgium.

I participated with the pilgrims not only in performing the rituals of communal prayer and *majalis* (mourning gatherings) but also in religious themed touristic excursions. Much interesting information was gained “soak[ing] up relevant data” (Mason, 2002, p. 90) at various religious and holy sites and by observing the pilgrims (both those within and outside the group). This allowed me to witness pilgrims’ religious experiences, their reflexive journey and their self-introspection. I was also acutely aware that I was a participant observer and that the pilgrimage was having a deep effect on me. The aftermath of the *ziyara* on a spiritual and emotional level only fully made sense to me after I had removed myself from the field and was talking about my experience with my friends and colleagues. Strong friendship ties developed between group members during the pilgrimage, and most of them maintained contact afterwards.

‘Headwork’: Longing for Authenticity

Authenticity emerged as a core concept in this research on several levels. First, authenticity emerged as a key dimension of the overall *ziyara* experience in relation to rituals, space/sites and material objects. Authenticity, as noted elsewhere (see Martyn, 1972), is essential for

pilgrims. The group members were yearning for an authentic experience that would allow them to connect with the real Islam. It is worth noting that authenticity also assumes a religious and socio-political dimension since it is often at the heart of heated sectarian debates among Muslims (e.g. who is to claim legitimacy in the leadership of the Ummah). A yearning for authenticity can also be identified in the Muslim feminist project to reinstate women based on the original Islamic teachings and practices of Prophet Mohammed. Second, authenticity is also an important dimension of the research process itself. Therefore, I need to address issues related to authorial voice. Authenticity is a problematic concept that reflects the extreme complexity of interacting phenomena, involving cultural contact, issues of identity, appropriation and commodification, and the dialectical tensions of tradition and change as well as the self and the cultural other (Costa and Bamossi, 2001). Thus, my epistemological and methodological approach can be understood as strategies I have deployed to enhance the verisimilitude of my account and analysis.

Geographical and historical Authenticity: the shires and holy sites

Travelling to Syria and Iraq allows pilgrims to reconnect with Islamic history. Karbala represents a microcosm of the ‘authentic’, ‘original’ Islamic society because of the historical density of the area. It was the theatre of the Karbala massacre and other significant events, such as the martyrdom of Imam Ali. The space ‘proximity’ was emphasized by the various timeless rituals we performed. The material environment (e.g. the desert, the shrines, the monuments and the bazaar) contributed to the feeling of displacement we all experienced. The visual iconography of the battle of Karbala and its main protagonists (represented in paintings, banners and flags), the various narratives repeated and performed during mourning gathering and the theatrical performances all provided strong cues for powerful experiences

and ‘reconnection’ with Muslim history. As pilgrims we engaged in acts of faith and the suspension of the time dimension whilst we imbued a sense of authenticity to the sites we visited. We were all aware that development work, construction (and destruction) had taken place, but the spiritual dimension is in essence non temporal. This attribution of authenticity illustrates the dialectical tensions between present and past, between material and spiritual, between sacred and secular and between the self and the cultural/temporal other.

In this case, an example of the (un)temporal other would be the historical characters who played a role in the events that are vividly recalled and re-enacted during *Ziyara-t-Araba’een*. Although I was familiar with the general events that shook the Islamic community after the death of the Prophet (see Mandelung, 1997), before the *ziyara*, I did not know the details of the Battle of Karbala. Indeed, a rather embarrassing fact I did not share with my fellow travellers was that I did not know the names of, nor even of the existence of, key actors in the Karbala tragedy and its aftermath. Most important, however, was that the feminine dimension of the research emerged from my learning of historical events.

The female characters lie at the heart of compelling and powerful narratives and, indeed, represent powerful role models for women. The ‘revolutionary’ female is an inspiring role model at odds with the commonly held misconception that Muslim women are passive and are/should be submissive to their male counterparts. In the historiography of the beginning of Islam, a number of female role models appear, such as Prophet Mohammed’s wives, in particular Khadija, Umm Salama as well as his daughter, Fatima (Armstrong, 2001; Esposito, 1998). They were renowned for their righteous behaviour, wisdom and piety. There are also a number of lesser known female scholars and mystics (Roded, 1999). The female descendants

of Prophet Mohammed, namely Fatima and her daughter Zeynab, were the characters the pilgrims in my group identified with and revered the most. They spoke fondly of these two women in the way that one would speak about a beloved member of one's own family.

Zeynab and the wives, daughters and sisters of the companions of Imam Hussein who died in Karbala have been credited with the success of Imam Hussein's uprising (Rizvi-Bokhari, 2012). They carried the revolutionary message of Imam Hussein in their public speeches. After the slaying of Imam Hussein and his army, the women and children were taken prisoner and forced to march in chains to Syria to be presented to Yazid, as a potent warning to the population not to consider rising up against the caliph's rule. Throughout this torturous journey, they spread the message of Imam Hussein's sacrifice; in the absence of media, they were able to narrate the events of Karbala to the crowds witnessing their misfortune. Their witness testimonies ensured that the news regarding the tragedy of Karbala was properly conveyed and transmitted to the people and that Hussein had not sacrificed his life in vain. The news of the tragic events of Karbala was widely disseminated, and Imam Hussein's followers' version of events was heard by many, countering the 'official' court propaganda. The content of those testimonies is still transmitted verbatim during the commemoration events of *Ashura* and *Arba'een*.

The bravery of those women, their selflessness (as they actively encouraged their husbands, sons and brothers to support Imam Hussein's cause and to participate in the battle) and their fearlessness are inspirational. During my trip, I 'discovered' a number of key characters (both villains and heroes), their names and their contribution to the events. I knew of Zeynab, but I did not know about her, and this has changed as a result of the pilgrimage. Her story, how she

stood up to injustice, protected her family and did not crumble in the face of adversity, is inspirational. I was moved to tears when I heard how she lost all her family and still shielded her nephew with her own body when the mercenaries came to kill him in his sick bed. She stood up in front of the caliph Yazid and fearlessly admonished him in front of his court. The content of her public address is still transmitted today in *majalis*. Her bravery, intellect and fearlessness left a lasting impression on me. I admire her, and I find myself inspired by her character and her quest.

I have also discovered a lot more about Fatima, the Prophet's daughter and the mother of Imam Hussein, Imam Hassan and Zeynab. She was a brave woman, patient, devout and well versed in religious and secular matters. Interestingly, the majority of the pilgrims in my group can be considered converts since they all (particularly the ethnic Moroccans) grew up as Sunni Muslims and reverted to Shi'ism much later in their lives. Many of my respondents described their discovery of history as eye opening. One of them told me that she did not know that Fatima had two daughters, Zeynab and Umm Kulthum. History, in this case, provides an authentication of women's role in Islamic society, within Muslim communities, which is an important dimension that had not gone unnoticed by the women of my group. The importance of women in the Prophet's family is central in Shi'a ritual and beliefs and provides a historical precedent for women's empowerment (Cooke, 2008). These stories also provide confirmation for the group members that adopting Shi'ism was a profoundly logical decision.

Cultural authenticity: the Arabo-Muslim context

Islam as a culture has developed historically according to the socio-cultural traditions and life conditions of people in different localities (Jafari and Suerdem, 2012), and Muslim practices must, therefore, be studied in their respective socio-cultural and historical contexts. The pilgrimage presented an example of Islam as both a religion and a culture, more specifically the Arabo-Muslim dimension of the religion. Jafari and Suerdem (2012, p. 70) note:

“The majority of Muslims are ‘born’ Muslim. They are born into the cultural practices of their societies which are intermingled with religion as just one of the constitutive resources (e.g. traditions, politics and incoming ideologies) that shape their everyday lives, personal and interpersonal relations, and world views. In their everyday life situations, religion becomes part of their culture to an extent that religious practices become mundane cultural norms without necessarily standing out as specifically extraordinary transcendental rituals. These cultural practices are concatenated with history, ethnicity, gender, literature, art and power relations. Therefore, the lifestyles embedded in these cultural settings can also resemble a diversity of such dynamics.”

Those ‘born’ Muslim also have various beliefs and different degrees of religiosity. The women of my group, while all ‘born’ Muslim, were ‘revert’ Shi’a Muslims. They had to ‘learn’ the Shi’a habitus, and this was heavily influenced by the Iraqi immigrant community in Brussels, which ‘taught’ the rituals to the women of the group. The Moroccans are culturally closer to Iraqi Shi’ism than, say, Iranian Shi’ism. The *ziyara* thus facilitate the integration of Belgian Muslim women of Moroccan descent into the Arabo-Muslim culture in

a predominantly Shi'a Islamic context. The 'Arabness' of the experience can be seen in the hospitality we received, which left a lasting impression on us (see Janardhan, 2002 and Sobh et al., 2013 for a discussion of Arab hospitality and multiculturalism). Many things such as the clothing and the food were Arabic (or Iraqi). For example, it took me a couple of days to get used to wearing the long, dark cloak (*'abaya*) that Iraqi women wear in Najaf and Karbala. After a few days, I was awarded the ultimate compliment by our group leader (an Iraqi woman and a native of the city of Karbala), who told me that I "*looked like a real Iraqi woman*".

The Authentic experience: consumption and identity

The research participants of Moroccan origin all reverted to Shi'ism later in their lives. They all recalled their initial dissatisfaction and questioning of religious-cultural traditions (i.e. Moroccan cultural practices passing as Islamic practices) and their research to understand their religion better for themselves (i.e. as opposed to uncritically accepting what others told them about religion). They all spoke to me about a journey that had been short for some and longer for others, one that had led to them adopting Shi'ism as the 'real' and 'natural' Islam. Knowing their religion better appeared to be important for the cultivation of their faith. In this way, cognitive growth is linked to spiritual growth (these observations are very similar to the findings of Jouili and Amir-Moazami (2006) about pious Muslim women's search for religious knowledge and their questioning of religious authority).

Reaching or 'achieving' authenticity was a central driver for undertaking the *ziyara*; it was about experiencing history at the heart of *Ziyara-t-Arab'een* rituals. Pilgrimages to saints'

and imams' mausoleums contribute to a strengthening of the Shi'a identity and sense of oneness with the community. Shi'a beliefs are sometimes described as heretical and unIslamic by some orthodox Muslims scholars (Nasr, 2006), and many Shi'a Muslims keep a low profile regarding their beliefs and practices. The pilgrimage experience allows pilgrims to openly express their identity through rituals, speech and consumption practices. The pursuit of common consumption interests fosters a sense of solidarity and collective identity, enabling consumers to differentiate themselves from others (Arnould and Thompson, 2005 in Karatas and Sandıkcı, 2013). According to Rosoux (2001), identities are created in a process of convergence (what the members have in common) and differentiation (what differentiates them from other groups). Accordingly, identities cannot be separated from the concept of otherness (Rosoux, 2001). Interestingly, the concept of sameness was prevalent in the context of the *ziyara*; the pilgrims appeared to have left their otherness back at home in Brussels and were experiencing the elation of being part of a community of believers.

The 'belonging' to the Shi'a community was crystallized in a number of objects that were not only consumed on-site but also purchased for consumption once the travellers were back home. These items, for example, '*aqiq* (semi-precious stone) rings – which were particularly sought after by the group members – would symbolically and visually demarcate the pilgrims (from Sunni Muslims) and identify them as Shi'a Muslims. Each type of '*aqiq* and its colour is linked to an Imam. For example, Imam Hassan's stone is turquoise and Imam Ali is linked to white '*aqiq*. Necklaces with pendants representing *Dhulfiqar*, the legendary sword of Imam Ali, also proved a popular purchase among pilgrims of both genders. Technically, most people would not automatically recognize it as a symbol of Shi'ism, but Shi'a Muslims would.

Popular items that were brought home for personal consumption or gift-giving were embroidered headscarves with the name of the Imams, banners, tapestries and wall drapes embroidered with elegies on Imam Hussein (used for decorating homes during the *Ashura* mourning period), rosaries, *torba* stones, headscarves and head-dresses. We also made the most of products that we would not easily find in Belgium being readily available. For example, most of us purchased long, dark dresses ('*abaya*) to attend *Ashura majalis*.

As such, Islamic material consumption allows the easiest acquisition of an Islamic habitus, at least at the representational level (i.e. how one expresses one's identity using visual cues), and the ritual/performance level to engage with communal religious practices (as part of their *ziyara*). It is nothing new that Muslim identities are constructed through commodities and consumption practices (Abu-Lughod, 1995; Fischer, 2008; Pink, 2009). Others have shown that commodities allow Muslims to be identified as such by others and between themselves and act as visual markers of belief (Gorakisel and McLarney, 2010). Objects are also markers of belief that facilitate the execution of ritual practices and the expression of religious identity (Gorakisel and McLarney, 2010). *Ziyara* pilgrims demonstrate their 'authenticity' as Shi'a Muslims by their participation in the pilgrimage, by projecting their identity via the consumption of particular objects and also through visual markers of their Shi'a identity, such as the '*aqiq* rings or the *Dhulfiqar* necklaces.

Authenticity in Textwork

Authenticity is also part of the account of the pilgrimage from my perspective. Through experiencing the pilgrimage myself and describing my own journey, I have been able to

provide an as ‘authentic-as-can-be’ account and reflect on this experience from an Islamic marketing/consumer research perspective. The effects of my journey on me as a researcher, as an ethnographer and as a pilgrim are ongoing. Due to the inclusion of autoethnographic data, I can claim to be a legitimate source of knowledge and *de facto* endorse my epistemic privilege as a ‘cultural insider’, adopting the authoritative standpoint of an insider (Bilge, 2010). Of course, this brings with it the burden of representation. When I explained the purpose of my research to my fellow travellers and asked permission to conduct the research, I received the positive, and yet daunting, response, “Yes, do this research, interview us, at least you will tell the truth about us”. Although I conducted the data collection and completed the *ziyara* in January 2012, this response has remained with me for a long time, assuming several meanings and having several implications. Researchers have an ethical responsibility to their research participants and to their readers. Ethical considerations and responsibilities thus guided my choice to represent myself alongside my participants, leaving myself open to readers’ opinions and judgements.

Conclusion

This manuscript provides a snapshot of research processes at the micro level with the contextualized consumption, interactions and sense making. It does so by zooming out and bringing into view the wider historical context. This is important because the local history and context are also part of the Islamic grand narrative. However, this is not straightforward as the pilgrims’ experiences (and mine) have shown that history can be manufactured and reconstructed to suit various agendas that I will not discuss here. It is clear that the part feminine characters have played in Islamic history and their socio-political importance has

been conveniently forgotten in mainstream religious knowledge dissemination to the Muslim masses.

I have used this chapter as an opportunity to explore issues of knowledge creation at a time when power struggles for meaning creation and authenticity are prevalent and prominent in the Muslim world. Issues related to ‘knowing’ (epistemology) and meaning have been discussed against the background of a pilgrimage undertaken by a group of Shi’a Muslim women from Belgium. The pilgrimage proved important in terms of reinforcing their religious identity. The consumption of objects and the visit to various sites of historical and religious importance (i.e. religious tourism) allowed them to get ‘closer to history’, and that revisiting of history allowed them to claim an authentic Muslim identity. It should be noted that while consumption was central to my analysis, I could also have addressed the ‘escape’ from the market which was possible by addressing the provision of free services to pilgrims (free meals, free accommodation, etc.) and the sharing and gift-giving practices that were prevalent and existed alongside the more ‘consumerist’ experience of the *ziyara* (see e.g. Moufahim, 2012).

I have put forward the argument that ethnography and autoethnography can provide interesting insights and make a novel contribution to critical perspectives on Islamic marketing. Theorizing from experience and making links with the experiences of others carries more weight and has a greater impact (Maynard, 1994; Williams, 1996 in Fawcett and Hearn, 2004). Autoethnography allows the ethnographer to move away from “the gaze of the distanced, detached observer and toward the embrace of intimate involvement, engagement, and embodied participation” (Ellis and Bochner, 2006, pp. 433-434).

I also wish to address the issue of reflexivity. Researcher reflexivity has been established as ‘good ethnographic practice’ (Brewer, 1994). It is a process that challenges the researcher to explicitly examine how her research agenda and assumptions, subject locations, personal beliefs and emotions impact upon the research (Hsiung, 2008). Self-reflexivity brings to consciousness some of the complex political/ideological agendas hidden in researchers’ written accounts (Richardson, 2000). My research approach is inevitably a reflection of my history, my privileged background and my experience of oppression. I was raised as a Muslim in Belgium by parents who believed in the value of education and in the message of love inherent in Islamic texts. My British academic background, my national culture(s), my family’s history of immigration, my social class and gender are all relevant facets of my identity that shape my experience and understanding of the world and, by extension, my experience of the *ziyara*. Others have documented Shi’a rituals and the place of women within those rituals, and they have questioned the ‘modern’ feminist reading of some of the Karbala narratives (e.g. Flaskerud, 2005). I have taken the perspective of a group of European Muslim women, of Moroccan and Iraqi descent, who found the pilgrimage to be both empowering and meaningful. I have chosen to take these women’s experience and lives as starting points for my analysis. I have, thus, highlighted the importance of the self-empowerment of (in)visible/voiceless Muslim women through positive role models.

The self can be conceptualized as a project actively created by individuals, partially through consumption (Giddens, 1991), and I have shown that in addition to reconnecting with historic role-models, the *ziyara* also allowed for the consumption of products (e.g. paintings, clothing, rings, etc.) that enabled the channelling of, and linking with, role models. My study includes Muslim women in a feminist analysis, not as ‘subjects’ to be saved, pitied and studied but

rather as cognisant agents of their own identity and choices (consumption being only one of those) and, therefore, as co-authors of this narrative on the *ziyara*.

Travel changes the ones who journey away from home in much the same way that pilgrimages and ethnographic research change the researcher. This piece of research is no different. It has been transformative. Researching others who look like me means that ultimately I am researching myself. Insights into the experience of others' can be reflected back to my own self and beg the question: What are the effects of research on the researcher/self? This alone emphasises the importance of reflexivity in ethnographic work; it also highlights autoethnography as an important source of data and self 'work'. The *ziyara* experience was intense, and the data collection proved emotionally draining. Emotional fatigue/strain is experienced by many ethnographers in particularly sensitive contexts or when engaging with vulnerable participants (Frank, 2004; Rager, 2005). Writing about the *ziyara* for publication proved equally draining for me, and I am still reflecting on why this has been so difficult. I would therefore call for a reflexive turn in relation to Islam in marketing theory. I would suggest that Islamic marketing researchers integrate reflexivity into their research and that the most daring amongst them even add autoethnographic vignettes to their work. Doctoral students have an opportunity to integrate self-reflexivity into their work, thus enhancing both the headwork and the textwork.

I conclude with a question that I hope will generate further discussion: Does Islamic marketing research explicitly need an Islamic epistemology? Certainly, developing ad-hoc marketing theory in Muslim religious and cultural contexts is a fruitful endeavour, but it might be worth considering adopting an Islamic perspective on marketing via an Islamic

epistemology. Many have questioned Islamic Marketing adding value to marketing theory. Studying marketing in a Muslim context is certainly interesting in its own right, but it is doubtful that such an approach would be deserving of an entirely new label. In fact, I would argue that for a meaningful use of the Islamic Marketing label, research must be embedded in an Islamic epistemology. We should remind ourselves that methodologies are not neutral; they reflect our worldview. If that worldview is Islamic, it is surprising that there is not more research using epistemological foundations and methodologies embedded in Islam. An Islamic paradigm would aim at integrating the empirical (e.g. the body) and the non-empirical (e.g. the soul) dimensions into a unified system of explanation of human behaviour (Ragab, 1992). Islam goes beyond the consideration of ‘spiritual’ factors influencing human behaviour, providing instead a coherent conceptualization of the relationship between body and soul through Divine Revelation. Ragab (1992) argues that in Islam there can be no ‘true’ science of human behaviour that excludes the spiritual dimension.

At the heart of our inquiry is the yearning for knowledge. Interestingly, *‘ilm*, the Arabic term used for knowledge, is an all-embracing term covering theory, action and education. *‘ilm* is not confined to the acquisition of knowledge; it also embraces socio-political and moral aspects (Akhtar, 2011). In other words, “knowledge is not mere information: it requires believers to act upon their beliefs and commit themselves to the goals that Islam sets for its followers” (Azram, 2011, p. 186). By adopting an Islamic feminist approach for my own research, I have attempted to align myself with such a framework. This is not an easy feat. Being Muslim does not make me a scholar of Islam. Being a Muslim researcher, researching a group of Muslim travellers/consumers in a religious setting, does not automatically make my research epistemologically ‘Islamic’.

Now is the time to establish a new approach to Islamic marketing theory, based on Islamic principles and indigenous heritage(s), ideally suited for the purpose, with its own mechanisms, methodologies and references. Building research and generating knowledge should be based on clear-cut epistemological foundations. It is not my intent here to dismiss those contributions that currently exist under the label of Islamic marketing, applying mainstream marketing theory(ies) to Muslim contexts. Rather, I call for research adopting an Islamic ontology and epistemology to inject novel/original ideas, perspectives and approaches to the project of theorization in Islamic marketing. If this were to transpire, we would not necessarily have to replace or reinvent paradigms and methodologies; rather, we could transform those we already have at our disposal into more functional and complex tools for studying Muslim societies and Muslim consumers. Ali (2006) reminds us of the importance of considering Islam in management and organization (and thus marketing) due to its long history of engagement in the advancement of knowledge and practice and in sophisticated forms of trade, business and administration. After all, Islam has contributed to scientific and social progress for centuries. It is hoped that such a different approach would enrich (mainstream) marketing.

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